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Xenophobia Complicates Better Relations Among South American Neighbors

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Since Bolivia and Paraguay, driven by private interests, confronted each other militarily in the 1932-1935 Chaco War, the armies of neighboring South American countries have not again resorted to military combat. In 1978, Chile and Argentina bared their teeth in the Beagle Channel, at the southern tip of the continent, regarding sovereignty over three islands as small as they were strategic. In 1995 some skirmishes occurred between Ecuador and Peru in the Cordillera del Cóndor ([NotiSur, Feb. 10, 1995](#), [Nov. 8, 1996](#), and [Oct. 30, 1998](#)). But those two incidents were nothing more than what the military calls "combat brouhahas," simple preparations that did not actually lead to combat.

Those situations were always preceded by provocative acts that were preparing the climate. In early February a video was made public on which Chilean sailors were seen marching while chanting xenophobic slogans against Bolivians, Peruvians, and Argentines, their only three neighbors.

As the days went by, it became known—through corroborating videos—that Bolivian, Peruvian, and Argentine cadets also chanted slogans against Chileans that were equally xenophobic. Thus an old South American tragedy was recurring—a confrontation among peoples, emerging almost always as a product of defending sectoral interests.

As is appropriate in these times of peace and rich integration experiences, the four countries quickly issued apologies. Now they all say that they knew of such incidents, but neither the presidents nor the ministers, the legislators, or the press that say they knew had ever denounced it. They allowed xenophobia to grow that in other times led to bloody confrontations in these same countries and left an underlying hatred among the people that is still there.

Chile has history of conflicts

A few days earlier, on Jan. 25, Chile had detained three Bolivian conscripts—youngsters between 18 and 20 years of age—who, while pursuing a group of automobile smugglers, had entered Chilean territory. Two were unarmed, and the third carried a Belgian-made FAL (Fusil Automatique Léger) automatic rifle from the 1950s.

The two incidents raised tensions to the maximum in the already fragile relations between the two countries. On March 1, 35 days after the Bolivian conscripts were detained, they were expelled from the country with the express warning to never again enter Chilean territory.

Historically, Chile has not had harmonious relations with its neighbors. From 1879 to 1883 it waged a bloody war against Bolivia and Peru, known as the Guerra del Pacífico (War of the Pacific) or the Guerra del Guano y Salitre (Guano and Saltpeter War), which shows clearly the interests at play behind the war. As a result, Peru lost its southern territories and Bolivia lost its access to the sea.

During the entire 20th century, Chile and Argentina waged a diplomatic dispute regarding islands in the Beagle Channel. In 1978, the dictatorships of both countries spent fortunes—and above all

exacerbated the nationalism of their peoples—to speed up resolution of the conflict, asking, by common agreement, the British Crown to mediate. Finally, when it seemed that the countries were on the brink of war, mediation by Pope Juan Paul II avoided armed conflict. In 1985, with the end of the dictatorship, Argentina ended the conflict through a plebiscite that approved the agreement hammered out by the papal mission ([NotiSur, Jan. 8, 1999](#)). In 1991, the civilian governments reached agreement on 21 points in the border controversy in the high Andean peaks ([NotiSur, March 21, 1997](#)).

Officially, relations are very harmonious. Since December 2006 a binational military contingent, the Batallón Cruz del Sur, was created, through which Argentina and Chile participate jointly in UN peacekeeping operations in Cyprus.

In these times, Chile has only two active controversies. One, with Peru, regards delineation of the maritime border, which is now in the hands of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague ([NotiSur, Nov. 18, 2005](#)). The other is with Bolivia, which claims a corridor through what had been its territory to give it access to a Pacific port ([NotiSur, June 18, 1987](#), and [April 8, 2011](#)).

Offensive training videos implicate all countries

On Feb. 6, a video was made public that was filmed at the Chilean resort town of Viña del Mar. In it, a group of 27 naval cadets are seen training to the shout of "I will kill Argentines, I will shoot Bolivians, I will cut Peruvians' throats." In Chile, the entire political spectrum reacted in a tone of condemnation, saying that it was an isolated incident.

The only one who justified it was Deputy Gonzalo Arenas of the Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), the party of admirers of the late dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). Arenas said that twenty years ago when he was a cadet, "proud of being a good Chilean, I chanted" the same combat slogan. He caustically advised that the Navy, "to avoid those violent songs, send the cadets to some embroidery classes and make them play the Ronda de San Miguel." (A Chilean "circle" game with the words, "Play the Ronda de San Miguel/whoever laughs goes to the barracks.")

The Argentine government expressed its "surprise and discomfort with what happened." Days later, it had to apologize when a video surfaced showing police-academy students in Mendoza province, on the border with Chile, chanting the warlike "Chilenito, Chilenito, be careful or one dark night I will enter your house, cut your throat, and drink your blood."

The Peruvian government said that it had assumed "that the antinomies were now a thing of the past or problems to be overcome civilly in the international courts." But Peru, like Argentina, also had to apologize when its Army cadets were seen in a training exercise shouting, "Long live Peru, death to Chile."

Bolivia uses incident to raise long-standing grievance

Bolivia, however, heaped wood on the fire. First, Communications Minister Amanda Dávila said, "That kind of military instruction is part of Chile's pedagogic formation, which makes rapprochement between the two countries impossible." Then, Vice Minister of Social Movement Coordination César Navarro said, "Chile continues to have a backward vision, appropriate for the 19th century." Defense Minister Rubén Saavedra, not to be outdone by his colleagues, said, "Chile is a country that generates controversies without justification, and its behavior does not help peace in South America."

The Bolivian newspaper *Diario de La Paz* rejected Chile's apology in an editorial on Feb. 7 and appealed to the worst nationalism to tell its readers that "what is not explained is that the goal of the training is to form soldiers with hatred ingrained in their spirits, and their formation is intended for confrontations with their neighbors within the framework of an expansionist strategy."

As an almost isolated voice in his country, Chilean journalist Ernesto Carmona told the alternative Mapocho Press news agency on March 7 that "the government's strange attitude in the face of these incidents handed President Evo Morales' local and international leadership a great opportunity on a platter and gave extraordinary transnational resonance, seldom achieved, to Bolivia's aspirations for access to the sea."

Two weeks earlier, while the conscripts' release was still a question, Morales had already proven Carmona right. In a letter dated Feb. 14 and not made public until March 3, when the president received the conscripts in La Paz as "heroes of the sea," he told them, "Your detention is equal to the country's suffering in not having access to the Pacific." In the letter, Morales also said, "Bolivians have been prisoners between the mountains for 134 years because the Chilean governments prefer to see us geographically cut off, economically weak, and socially dependent."

Referring specifically to the conscripts' situation, Morales added to the dangerous chorus of those throwing gasoline on the fire, saying, "No nation that pretends to be civilized locks up those who are going after criminals, and no government applies national laws to citizens of other countries to judge noble actions that benefit both peoples."

Without distinguishing between democratic governments and the dictatorships that existed in Chile since the early 20th century, Morales said, "Only tyrannical consciences are capable of this huge injustice that violates international law," and adding, "Every minute that our conscripts are locked up is time that wounds the soul, but at the same time it contributes to shedding light on consciousness regarding the atrocious and brutal blow that the Chilean forces, promoted by the oligarchy, dealt us in 1879."

Just as Carmona imagined, Morales ended with a phrase aimed more at educating the exterior than for internal consumption: "That Chilean invasion took away more than 120,000 sq km of our territory and closed off our natural corridor of sovereign access to the Pacific."

Remarkably, in none of the four countries did any of the press that feeds xenophobia day by day reprint the opinion of Manuela Vasena, the young Argentine who filmed the Chilean cadets. "In Viña, the Chileans were as indignant as I was, and they did not understand why the chant was used," Vasena told the daily *La Voz del Interior*, which published it but buried on one of the back inside pages.

In Buenos Aires, Ricardo Ragendorfer, a columnist with the magazine *Miradas al Sur*, asked, "Why is it that no one focused on what Manuela Vasena said? Who is interested in multiplying xenophobic demonstrations?"

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